



To: USDA

From: Alfred R. Bettencourt, Jr
Director

Subject: USDA Forum

Here are my responses to your questions regarding farm policy considerations.

Challenges for new farmers.

The unintended consequences of farm policy questions are the same for new farmers as veteran farmers. I often give the following quote when discussing issues related to farming. I say that if you ask a farmer if he will go out of business because of a drought the answer is no. If you ask will he go out of business because of any kind of weather conditions the answer is no. How about an insect infestation? No. How about too many regulations from the government? The answer is always yes.

The reporting requirements for pesticide use are getting out of hand. Wetlands regulations are out of hand and many of those regs are initiated at the federal level. The amount of paper work required to participate in many farm programs is absurd. Not only does the above discourage new farmers, it pushes old farmers into retirement earlier than they planned.

Competitiveness:

The best thing the government can do to maximize US competitiveness is to negotiate trade agreements that promote "free trade" and make sure we do not allow importation of foreign food and fiber that is subsidized by the government of those countries. I still believe American farmers are the most productive in the world. On a worldwide basis if there were no farm subsidies no other farmers in the world could compete with the American farmers. Thus, we should always strive to eliminate all subsidies and encourage other nations to do the same. However, when other countries subsidize their farmers, we should either not accept their imports (by imposing higher tariffs) or we should subsidize our farmers equally.

USDA should work to reinstate the Northeast Dairy Compact and other dairy compacts to allow dairy farmers in the Northeast to be more competitive with mid-western farmers.

Farm Program Benefits:

Current farm policy is not designed effectively and fairly to distribute assistance. Throughout the history of the Department of Agriculture the so called "program crops"

have always enjoyed a disproportionate amount of funds from USDA. As stated in the above paragraph, I would prefer no subsidies. But, if we must have them, there should be more help for vegetable farmers, nurseries and other farms.

Conservation Goals:

The conservation programs offered by USDA are good. However, many of the projects are over designed and the requirements are too stringent and costly. A former ASCS administrator referred to many of our waste management facilities as Monument to ASCS because the facilities would last longer than the farms did. When I was the SED of the ASCS I recall SCS rejecting a retaining wall in a waste management facility over very technical reasons. My gut told me that wall would stand tall for the required 10 years but SCS would not certify the project and the farmer did not get his cost share. As I write this letter that project has been standing strong and tall for over 20 years. (A Monument to ASCS!) Then and now farmers complain to me about the burdensome requirements and the huge amount of paper work.

More funds should be available for cost sharing on fencing to keep wild animals off farmers property.

Rural Economic Growth:

Years ago and today the federal government assisted farmers with electrification. Today, I believe they should assist with all utilities. We have a town right now (Exeter) that could use assistance in providing a water line to a project. They don't qualify for a grant because their median income is too high. Adjustments need to be made in applying these formulas. Exeter is far from a rich town and it is one of the most rural towns in the state. To be denied assistance because of the median income formula does not make sense in this town. While there may be pockets of wealthy neighborhoods, this town is far from being one of the wealthiest towns in the state. Thus, there is a flaw in the formula.

More funds should be provided to purchase development rights from willing farmers. However, under no circumstances should the relinquishment of development rights diminish the remaining property rights of the farmer.

Expansion of Ag Products, Markets, and Research.

Expand the WIC and Senior Citizens coupons programs but mandate that states allow all farmers to participate and not just selected farmers (like those who participate in so called farmer's markets.)

Provide startup funds to develop farmer's co-ops such as the RI Dairy Farmers Co-op better known as Rhody Fresh.

RT
Farm Bill Forum
Comments

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